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ABSTRACT

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 has ushered in a new era of welfare reform. A work-first approach emphasizes self-sufficiency designed to move welfare recipients into the workforce as quickly as possible. The first of two issues related to the current context of welfare-to-work programming is legislation and policy. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families created by PRWORA has established greater work requirements for all parents and placed a 5-year lifetime limit on receiving aid. Assumptions underlying the legislation, including those in the words "personal responsibility," imply that poverty and joblessness result from individuals' failure to act on opportunities and that a lack of literacy and basic skills leads to unemployment. The second issue is that education's role in the work-first environment has been de-emphasized and its focus shifted from preparing people for jobs to providing training concurrent with jobs. Research suggests welfare-to-work programs that combine job-search assistance with education and training are more successful. The following are guidelines for welfare-to-work program development: collaborate with local agencies; focus on training for jobs with potential in the local labor market; include a combination of academic and occupational learning experiences designed to lead to further education and training; attend to instruction; and work to change current policies. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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by Susan Imel

ERIC DIGEST 2000

NO. 216

Welfare to Work: Considerations for Adult and Vocational Education Programs

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 ushered in a new era of welfare reform that emphasizes economic self-sufficiency through a "work-first" approach designed to move welfare recipients into the work force as quickly as possible (Hayes 1999). Known as a rapid-employment strategy (General Accounting Office [GAO] 1999), the work-first approach assumes that "the best preparation for work is work itself and that welfare recipients will gain experience in entry-level jobs and move on to better work" (Castellano 1998, p. 284). Education and training for welfare recipients now consists primarily of short-term training programs for welfare recipients and limited training sessions after work for those who have found jobs (Hayes 1999). The work-first philosophy has created challenges for adult and vocational educators who provide education and training for welfare recipients. This ***Digest*** presents some considerations for developing welfare-to-work programs in the current context. Issues related to the welfare-to-work programs and characteristics of successful programs are reviewed. Recommendations for program development based on the literature conclude the ***Digest***.

Related Issues

A number of issues are related to the current context of welfare-to-work programming. Two discussed here are legislation/policy and the role of education in the work-first environment.

Legislation and Policy

PRWORA, the primary federal legislation driving welfare reform, created Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for providing block grants to states. Compared to its predecessors, TANF established greater work requirements for all parents, regardless of the ages of their children and also placed a 5-year lifetime limit on receiving aid (GAO 1999). Although states must meet minimum federal requirements for the work participation rates of their welfare recipients, they are given latitude in what can be counted as work (Hayes 1999). An additional piece of federal legislation affecting the development of programs for welfare recipients is the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Passed in 1998, it consolidates over 70 work force programs and gives states the flexibility to partner with local governments to develop streamlined services that provide universal access to education and training (Imel 2000).

The flexibility offered states by these pieces of federal legislation has led to great variation in both state legislation and policies related to TANF recipients (Grubb et al. 1999; Hayes 1999). Some states–for example, Illinois–are using their own funds to support welfare recipients and therefore setting back the clock on the time limits imposed by PRWORA (Hayes 1999). Others, such as Wisconsin, have developed creative approaches that combine work first with a human capital strategy (Grubb et al. 1999). Unfortunately, innovative and creative approaches have not been the norm so that "in the push to move people into work, many states have made education within welfare reform a secondary consideration" (Hayes 1999, p. 7).

States with clear policies related to work force development have emphasized local control of education and training through the development of local work force development boards (Grubb et al. 1999). One drawback to this development is the fact that at the local level educational options available to TANF clients are often ignored or misunderstood (Hayes 1999).

Assumptions underlying the legislation present another set of issues. The words *personal responsibility* in the title of PRWORA imply that somehow poverty and joblessness result from individuals' failure to act on opportunities. Also, an assumption exists that a lack of literacy and basic skills leads to unemployment. These assumptions ignore underlying social and economic structural problems as causes of poverty and joblessness (D'Amico 1999). The legislation is geared toward ending welfare, not the underlying causes that create the need for it (Hayes 1999).

Education and Training in the Work-First Environment

In the current welfare-to-work environment, the role of education and training has been sharply curtailed, and its focus shifted from preparing people for jobs to providing training concurrent with jobs (Hayes 1999). Work, rather than lifelong learning or education, is stressed (Sheared, McCabe, and Umeki 2000). In addition, the type of education and training conducted under PRWORA focuses on individual instrumental growth and economic development rather than on fostering social change or action (Sparks 1999). Thus programs rarely encourage participants to engage in analysis of the system that has created the need for welfare.

More than a little irony surrounds the move to deemphasize the role of education and training in welfare-to-work programs. Although the welfare rolls have dropped significantly since the introduction of TANF, this reduction may be attributed in part to the current booming economy. Many welfare recipients have been placed in entry-level, low-wage jobs with little or no opportunity for advancement so they can avoid using part of their 5-year eligibility or so that agencies can address the pressure to remove welfare recipients from the rolls (Grubb et al. 1999). This type of work is limiting and only serves to perpetuate the marginal status of individuals on welfare (Sheared, McCabe, and Umeki 2000).

Characteristics of Successful Programs

Research on welfare-to-work programs developed under the PRWORA is limited. However, a review of research (GAO 1999) conducted on previous generations of welfare-to-work programs suggests that programs that combine job-search assistance with some education and training tend to be more effective over a 5-year period than programs focusing on either job placement or basic skills training. Programs that used a combined approach were more successful in helping participants obtain employment and increase their earnings, while reducing welfare payments.

Studies (Grubb et al. 1999; Murphy and Johnson 1998) of welfare-to-work programs support the effectiveness of a combined approach. Among the characteristics identified by both studies were a focus on employment-related goals through instruction that integrated basic and occupational skills training with work-based learning, collaboration with other agencies to provide support services, and attention to instruction. Grubb et al. also found that effective programs collected and used information on program outcomes to improve programs as well as to satisfy funding requirements for outcome measures.

The review of research on welfare-to-work programs (GAO) conducted during the past 2 decades shows that an approach with a

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strong employment focus can have positive effects. However, "more needs to be known about how well different approaches are performing in the current environment created by the enactment of welfare reform in 1996, which none of the evaluations cover" (ibid., p. 2).

Guidelines for Program Development

The current work-first environment does present challenges for adult and vocational educators wishing to serve welfare recipients. The following guidelines based on the literature can be used in developing welfare-to-work programs:

- **Collaborate with local agencies.** Interagency collaboration is a necessary ingredient of successful programs. It can provide a forum for interpreting and implementing state and local policies in ways that are favorable to education (Hayes 1999) and also serve as the medium for providing essential support services such as transportation and child care. Interagency collaboration promotes service integration that in turn enhances the retention of participants (McIntire and Robins 1999).

- **Focus on training for jobs that have potential in the local labor market.** Program developers must understand the local labor market so that they can target training for jobs that have relatively high earnings, opportunity for advancement, and potential for growth in the local market (Grubb et al. 1999). Unfortunately, the availability of low-skill, entry-level jobs in the current job market plus the narrow scope of funding for education and training in most states' welfare reform policies have resulted in the placement of many welfare-to-work participants in occupations with limited opportunity (McIntire and Robins 1999). Educators should strive to overcome these limitations by working with local employers and officials responsible for economic development.

- **Include a combination of academic and occupational learning experiences designed to lead to further education and training.** Evaluations of welfare-to-work programs conducted during the past 2 decades show clearly that the most effective programs are those that mix job search, basic skills education, job training through the development of occupational skills, and paid and unpaid work experience (GAO 1999). These elements should be integrated with one another, with the intensity of academic and occupational training tailored to the jobs targeted (Grubb et al. 1999). Furthermore, these programs should be structured so that they lead to opportunities for further education and training when participants are ready (ibid.).

- **Attend to instruction.** Instruction should be linked to the workplace and to further education and training (Castellano 1998). Unfortunately, instruction in many programs is delivered by inexperienced instructors or those who have no training in linking instruction to work (Grubb et al. 1999). Therefore, professional development of instructors must be a priority (ibid.; Murphy and Johnson 1998).

- **Work to change current policies.** Finally, adult and vocational educators should work to change current policies that focus on ending welfare to those that are oriented to ending poverty (D'Amico 1999; Hayes 1999). Although a work-first approach might be a short-term solution to reducing the current welfare rolls, it does not represent the needs of learners and of educators nor does it address the underlying structural problems that lead to poverty and joblessness (D'Amico 1999; Sparks 1999).

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